

Don't be fooled, figs grow fine in Western Oregon

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CORVALLIS – Though they look tropical and taste exotic, figs grow fine in the long corridor of Western Oregon, where the climate offers not-too-cold winters and hot-enough summers.

Of 100 or more cultivars, Copp recommends three figs: 'White Kadota,' 'Desert King' and 'Lattarula,' which he refers for fresh eating.

The cooler summers of the coast and colder winter temperatures east of the Cascades are a different story, though. The weather in those areas is not conducive to growing the love-it or leave-it fruit.

Not all varieties of figs thrive, however. Of 100 or more cultivars, Cody Copp, Oregon State University Extension Service horticulturist, recommends three figs: 'White Kadota,' 'Desert King' and 'Lattarula,'

which he prefers for fresh eating. All have yellowish-green skin and amber flesh. They are sufficiently cold hardy, ripen nicely and may produce two harvests.

Except for pruning, which can be tricky for beginners, the plants are pretty bullet proof, according to Copp. Plant them in quick-draining soil in the hottest spot in the garden and you've done your duty.

When it comes time to plant – fall is optimal – choose a south-facing aspect where the sun shines all or most of the day. The soil should be loose enough to drain well. Adding organic material will help with that. Make sure the pH is neutral; shoot for 6.5 to 7. Adding lime to the soil will bring Western Oregon's typically acidic-leaning soil up to the correct level, Copp said.

Planting is no different than other trees. Dig a hole twice as wide as the root ball and the same depth as it is in the pot. Work some compost into the hole, place the plant and backfill with soil. Water well and you're good to go. Rather than using commercial fertilizer, top dress the soil around the tree with compost once a year. Avoid fertilizing in summer. Don't expect fruit for the first few seasons.

As far as watering, less is more. Once roots are well established, an inch of water every couple of weeks is sufficient.

To add more fig trees to your collection, propagating by cuttings is an easy task. In winter when the plant is dormant, clip off a piece about 8 to 10 inches long. Cut below a node and at the tip of the stem. Stick the piece in a pot of potting mix and leave it through spring. At that point, the small plant can go in the ground, but keeping it in a pot for a year is not a bad idea.

Vigorous plants that need room

Copp doesn't recommend growing figs in pots for the long term. They are vigorous plants that need room for sustainable root growth. If you have a small space to garden and a container is the only choice, start with a pot that will accommodate several years of growth and then transplant to a larger one. A 7-gallon container should be sufficient for three to four years; a 15 gallon for seven to eight. Once the pot fills with roots, growth will become weaker, and he suggests pulling the plant out and pruning the roots severely. The top will have to be pruned significantly, also.

Make sure the pot has good drainage holes and use a soilless potting mix. Don't overwater. Check by sticking a finger into the soil. If it's dry an inch below the surface, it's time to water. Feed with a thick layer of well-rotted manure on top of the soil, a foliar fertilizer once a month or a balanced (5-5-5) fertilizer in early spring and late spring.

Though not as complicated to prune as other fruit trees, it takes some practice to learn the art of pruning fig trees. First, Copp strongly suggests growing your fig as a multi-trunked plant. The

plant's natural tendency is to branch, so why fight it?

To get going on pruning, follow Copp's tips:

- Prune in January or February by opening up the interior of the tree and reducing its height. Start by standing back and studying the tree to see where you want to cut. To open up the interior, concentrate on taking out old wood, including a few large limbs. Leave about a third to a half of the 1-year growth because that is what produces fruit. It's easy to tell the difference: The 1-year growth is green and smooth. Mature wood is gray. Also, the 1-year wood will have developing fruit on the tips of new growth that look like tiny nubbins.
- Move on to the top of the tree. Unlike the rule not to cut the top off other trees, figs can be "topped" to restrict height. When reducing the height of a tree always make your reduction cut to an outward growing branch. In other words, come down the branch to a point where a side branch is growing outward and cut above that. This will spread the growth of the tree to improve light into the center. By keeping good light in the interior, it will help to generate new wood lower in the canopy and keep fruit where you can reach it.
- In colder winters the first crop of fruit may freeze, although Copp said that hasn't happened in the last four years. Check fruit when the tree leafs out in spring. If the fruit is black, it's dead. As soon as you can, prune out the dead branch tips to generate new growth. The earlier you do this the better chance you have of getting the second crop of figs to ripen.



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Figs grow fine in the long corridor of Western Oregon, where the climate offers not-too-cold winters and hot-enough summers.

Photo: Judy Scott

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